THE SECRET LIFE OF CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Norman Hillmer

Canada's foreign policy has, inevitably and invariably, been anchored in relations first with Britain and later with the United States. Multilateralism has historically been our means of asserting our independence from one or the other. But like the secret life of Walter Mitty, it is a fiction, a dream sequence divorced from the reality of Canada's interests, writes historian Norman Hillmer. "Eighty-five percent of our foreign policy resides in our relations with the United States," he writes. "That is a brutal fact, and that is the interest we most zealously and effectively protect."

De façon tout aussi inévitable qu'invariable, la politique étrangère du Canada a toujours été intimement lié à la Grande-Bretagne, puis aux États-Unis. Et pour affirmer notre indépendance à l'égard de l'un et de l'autre pays, nous avons historiquement professé notre adhésion au multilatéralisme. Mais à l'exemple de la vie secrète de Walter Mitty, cette position est pure fiction, un rêve sans rapport avec la réalité des intérêts canadiens, croit l'historien Norman Hillmer. « À proportion de 85 p. cent, observe-t-il, notre politique étrangère se résume à nos liens avec les États-Unis. Telle est la vraie réalité, et tels sont les intérêts que nous protégeons avec le plus de zèle et d'efficacité. »

Like the magnificent James Thurber's fictional character Walter Mitty, Canadian foreign policy has a secret life. Mitty was a mild-mannered accountant with an imagination full of great feats and derring-do, but when handed the possibility of genuine heroism, he found that it had its drawbacks. Canada too is a cautious beast wanting so much more from the world than the limited options that are readily available. So we manufacture dreams.

Canada follows its interests directly, ruthlessly, relentlessly. There is nothing surprising or sinister about that. All nations do it. But Canadians are reluctant to tell the truth, which is that the historic alignments of their foreign policy, first to Great Britain and then the United States, are what have mattered in the final analysis. We construct masks, therefore — masks of independence, or of multilateral activism. They are our secret life. They obscure our core interests. They make us happy, and that in turn makes the politicians who perpetrate the fraud happy.

The point can be demonstrated with four cases, some that now seem rather ancient, some quite recent. In each, the government's rhetoric, although delivering authentic concerns, misled the public and, frequently, misled Canada's friends and allies. In each, when elemental decisions were necessary, policy-makers rushed not to the rhetoric but to the reality. The rhetoric spoke to small politics, consisting of short-term expediencies and what the public wanted to hear; the reality spoke to a larger politics, what was demanded at those moments when the strategic imperative became fully clear.

Case 1. The liberal nationalism of Wilfrid Laurier and William Lyon Mackenzie King, who between them ruled the Liberal Party from 1887 to 1948 and governed Canada from 1896 to 1911 and for most of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

Viewing politics through the prism of national unity, Laurier and King led a campaign to advance Canadian autonomy in international affairs, at the apparent expense of the country's position within the British Empire. They promised that Parliament would decide Canada's fate. They claimed that they would make no commitments to some future hypothetical imperial course.

All this was a sham. Canada's national interest lay not in a narrow independence but in a broader commitment to an Anglo-Canadian alliance. Canada stood with Britain quietly in peacetime and ostentatiously in the two great wars of the first half of the twentieth century, reflecting the widespread understanding that Canadian interests were ultimately tied to a larger world, and the crucial domestic fact that majority opinion would put up with nothing less.

Case 2. Cold War internationalism, when foreign policy headlines were grabbed by activism, not alliances.

Canada joined almost every conceivable international organization. Lester B. Pearson's Nobel Prize launched a dozen peacekeeping ships. Governments trumpeted that theirs was a uniquely global foreign policy, and that we had exceptional

gifts to offer a world that would be better off if it only had a little more Canada. Moral multilateralism became part of the definition of modern Canadianism.

Early on during his long time in office, Pierre Trudeau stipulated that Canada was a modest power that needed to tend to its own backyard. His foreign policy, however, soon took on the activist hue of his postwar predecessors. The myth grew that he was a champion of the developing world and that his Pearsonian mission of peace had saved the globe, even while Trudeau held the Americans at bay.

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Yet all the Cold War prime ministers were hard-headed realists who appreciated that a bipolar world severely limited Canada's options. Canadians were firmly anti-Communist and firmly anti-Soviet. Canada was a North American state, its continental destiny reinforced by strategic and economic necessity. Canada was indeed a modest power, vulnerable to attack as it had not been before the Second World War. We needed our best friend, the United States, and set our policies accordingly. The American alliance gave Canada the space in which to construct its good works abroad and to nation-build at home.

Case 3. Late 1990s Axworthyism, a populist philosophy ardently advocated and effectively promoted by the most activist foreign minister in Canadian history.

Lloyd Axworthy's idealistic human security agenda is fresh enough in public memory to need little elaboration. The International Criminal Court, the landmines treaty and the campaign against children-soldiers were all Good Things. They were widely regarded as such by Canadians, even if commentators didn't much approve of the foreign minister's pulpit diplomacy.

The government's real agenda, however, was embodied in the Jean Chrétien Team Canada trade missions. "Anything for a buck," as one scholar summarized Canadian foreign policy. And most of the bucks lay south of the border, where there was annoyance with Axworthy's preachy policies but the knowledge that, in its fundamentals, the relationship was rolling nicely along, led by golfing buddies Chrétien and Bill Clinton, who did each other favours when favours were needed.

Case 4. The world according to 11 September 2001, when the United States went to war and Canada did not.

Canadian opinion moved away from George W. Bush's America, not closer. The Liberal Party's chatter reflected that thinking, and the prime minister sometimes spoke openly about a right wing United States of which he and we disapproved. He put on his Pearsonian shoes and went off to the international dance that he had often left to others, most particularly in his championing of the Kyoto Accord and the New Partnership for Africa's Development.

But we joined the campaign against terror in Afghanistan, and we had long been a stalwart in the imposition of sanctions against Iraq in the Persian Gulf. Most telling of all, Chrétien named his top minister, John Manley, to the highest priority task: stewardship of the Canadian-American border, where the national interest preeminently was located.

So much less important, the prime minister knew, despite American cries that military expenditure was too meagre for a post-September 11 world, was the national defence portfolio. To that post went a Cabinet neophyte, intelligent and well-meaning, but a neophyte nonetheless. Nothing much happened on that front because, at bottom, defence was never very important to Canadians in peacetime. Nor had the government's inattention to the matter seriously damaged the continental relationship. Canada, except in wartime, had always done just enough to get by on defence. Nothing more, mind you.

Lately the view has gotten around that Canadian policies do not reflect the national interest, or that policy-makers do not know what those interests are. It is an understandable impression, since policy is so frequently wrapped in an appeal to a set of vague values that we are meant as Canadians to hold dear.

But that is the diverting mask. Accommodating a political imperative, Canada avoided the war in Iraq, but at the same time we were serving the Canadian-American alliance elsewhere and nurturing that smart border for all we were worth. The policy speeches of Paul Martin are dominated by calls to international activism — the Canada Corps, nation-building, and a leaders' G-20 — but this is the voluntary part of our foreign policy, and the peripheral part. Eighty-five percent of our foreign policy resides in our relations with the United States. That is the brutal fact, and that is the interest we most zealously and effectively protect.

Canada knows precisely where its national interests lie, and Canadian foreign policy aims to advance those interests. We just don't admit it.

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